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Curing what ails you: From nightclub to hospital

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BAGHDAD, Iraq – Iraq is a country steeped in rich history, and its individual structures are no different. Each building has its own story to tell those willing to listen.

The Alwaiya Children's Hospital, located in the busy Karadah district of Baghdad, once served as a nightclub for Baghdad Jews in the 1940s. During World War II, many of Iraq's Jews left the country and headed to Palestine – leaving behind vacant buildings, which the Government of Iraq bought to put to other uses.

In the late 1940s, the vacant Jewish social club was turned into a government-run general clinic. Most of the hospitals and clinics were run by foreign doctors because the country only had one medical school and was not producing enough doctors to staff all of its hospitals and clinics. Due to the shortage, the hospital was



A baby gets assistance breathing in an incubator at the Alwaiya Children's Hospital in Baghdad's Karadah district. (USACE photo)

turned into a specialty facility in the 1970s, focusing its care primarily on children.

What is more momentous is that in the 1970s, the hospital became one of the first in the country to be staffed by all Iraqi doctors. An adjacent building was purchased in the 1980s to serve as an outpatient clinic.

In 2004, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) began the first complete renovation on the facility in more than 65 years. The \$2.6 million project was done in three phases – an assessment phase, a renovation of Building One, and a renovation of Building Two. The project was laid out in this manner in order to keep the facility open and treating the more than 1 million children it serves throughout the renovations.

"Since the facility was first built, only minor renovations had been done on it,"



A doctor administers intravenous medication to a boy while his father holds him at the Alwaiya Children's Hospital in Baghdad's Karadah district. (USACE photo)

said Anmar Abdul Kareem, the deputy program engineer for USACE's Gulf Region Central district. "Improvements like repainting hallways and doing small electrical or plumbing repairs."

Many renovations were done incorrectly and not up to international building codes, Abdul Kareem said.

"When the initial assessment was done, we found four different roofs layered on top of each other – which was too heavy and made the building structurally unsound," he said. "We also found stairs layered over old sets of stairs, and sewer pipes placed atop old sewer pipes."

Renovations began in 2004. Each building was gutted, then new walls and floors, electrical and plumbing systems, heating and ventilation systems, lighting and clean air systems were installed. Upgrades included a communication/paging system, a reverse osmosis system, an emergency lighting system, and Internet access from each patient bed.

The project, which is scheduled for completion in August 2007, will bring the Alwaiya Children's Hospital into the forefront in medical care for children. Baghdad currently has four hospitals that focus on children's care, but Alwaiya is the only one that received a complete makeover by the U.S. Government, according to Ahmed Al Barak, the quality assurance project engineer for USACE's Gulf Region Central district.

"The other (children's) hospitals in Baghdad have received assistance from humanitarian efforts," Al Barak said. "Renovations, such as new paint jobs or minor electrical repairs or medical consumables, have helped the other facilities, but none have received the extensive upgrades that Alwaiya has."

Throughout the construction work, the hospital has remained open and seeing



Workers finish tiling the breezeway between the two buildings that make up the Alwaiya Children's Hospital in Baghdad's Karadah district. (USACE photo)

patients. When the entire project is completed, there will be 120 beds for patients – many of whose parents come from other provinces and seek out Alwaiya to receive top care for their children.

"We have 26 Iraqi doctors working at the hospital," said Dr. Tarif Fazil, the director of the Alwaiya Children's Hospital. "During peak season – very warm weather or very cold weather – we can see up to 1,000 patients a day. We don't admit that many, however."

Alwaiya continues to make history. From nightclub to state-of-the-art children's hospital, the building stands fast to continue fulfilling the needs of Iraqis.

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